

# chapter one

*"But I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep."*

ROBERT FROST

My sweater was coated in a layer of mist—again—a by-product of life in London. I barely noticed the constant drizzle anymore. It's not as if the cold bothered me, not when I was the very definition of cold.

What *was* bothering me was the smell. There is something rank about a meat market at night—especially when you're wedged into the eaves wondering what, over the years, has been sprayed about and never cleaned away. I shuddered.

The Smithfield Market was currently in vogue, but a gritty sense of history thickened the air, giving it a density that made me sure this wasn't the first time the site had been used for wicked intent. And right now, it was hunting hour.

At least I was the hunter.

I watched quietly as the exiles came into the center of the massive terminal-style space, vaguely interested to note that there were six of them, instead of the four I'd expected. No bother, I suppose. I still had the element of surprise on my side.

The past two years had taught me not to let the everyday hiccups get to me. Sure, the additional muscle would hurt, but only in the physical sense, and I could cope with that. Rolling with the punches is necessary when you are a Grigori—a human-angel hybrid—a weapon against the ever-increasing numbers of exiled angels on earth. For me even more so, since they gave me such a colorful nickname. I'm the Keshet—the rainbow. I didn't ask to be, but I made my choices and I stand by them.

So, there I was. Although I was still trying to figure out exactly what being the rainbow meant, mostly I found that the desire to know conflicted with my continuing need not to think about it at all. One thing I did know was that somehow I could create space with the angels—an unknown place where we were able to take form and communicate. My angel maker—whose name I still didn't know—said it was a place of new possibilities. For what, I was not sure.

*But I know this is what I am. It is what I will be.*

The final two exiles sauntered up to the four already waiting. It used to be impossible for me to be this close to exiles without them going into a frenzy, sensing my presence. But I'd learned many lessons over the past year, the most useful of which had been how to keep my guards up and locked so tight that even exiles couldn't sense me when I was truly concentrating.

*Which—judging by the thin film of sweat on my forehead—is now.*

The exiles dumped the huge calico sack they had been dragging along the floor and pulled it open, revealing three mutilated bodies to join the two maimed ones already on display.

From my position it was difficult to tell how old the corpses were, and if the smell was able to give a clue, I wouldn't have known, the stink of death and flesh being an overall theme of the place.

It was no wonder the exiles liked it so much.

Normally, exiles wouldn't bother with the cleanup—leaving evidence was of no concern. *Normally*, the exiles enjoyed the mess and despair they left behind. But not these exiles. These dark exiles were working for someone else. They'd been following a plan, using a hit list, and it was all too well constructed for any one of them to mastermind. Our intel told us they'd been hired. Such behavior would usually be considered beneath them, but apparently this group of exiles had decided the job was thrilling enough to suffer the humiliation of working for the highest bidder—even if that was a human.

As for the billionaire businessman, well, that's not my department, but someone will pay him a visit. Right after all the evidence of his wrongdoing—minus the exile activity—is handed over to the authorities and his bank accounts are heavily siphoned to pay for the futures of his victims' families. And our fee, of course.

*Which, thanks to certain people, is exorbitant.*

Two of the exiles were dressed impeccably: one in a steel-gray suit and sporting villain--typical slicked--back hair; the other wore a slim--collared black suit that hugged his tall figure and set off his of--the--moment tousled, light brown hair. The remaining four were less striking in casual wear, though nonetheless picture perfect. All six looked over the bodies like fishermen comparing the size and quality of their haul. My hand grazed my dagger, the blade that had been given to me after I first embraced my powers and became a Grigori warrior three years ago. I was never without it. I even had a sheath attached to my bed for a quick draw if needed.

I'd learned the hard way—through the death and suffering of people I loved and, strangely enough, through my own death and suffering—exiles stop at nothing. Their insanity and misguided missions know no bounds, and they take pleasure in causing great pain and suffering to humankind.

At least tonight I would only face exiles of dark. A couple of years ago, the two opposing sides, light and dark, had called a truce. Of course, I tried not to think back to that time.

I tried constantly.

The discovery of the scripture that could end all Grigori had found its way into my hands. That in itself was part of the reason the Assembly had rejected me. They blamed me for trading with the dark exile, Phoenix. My decision had allowed him to resurrect Lilith—his mother, the first dark exile—from the dead, and she had taken control of the Grigori Scripture. But at the time, my choice had been a simple one. Phoenix had Steph, my best friend, and I wasn't about to take any chances with her life. I've never regretted that choice.

Not like so many others I've made.

In the end, that made it easier to walk away from a place in the Academy when Josephine decided to change her mind. Of course, that was after I'd given my life, Lincoln's soul had shattered, and Phoenix had died—proving that not only was he the son of Lilith, but he was also the human son of the first man, Adam—all so that I could kill Lilith. And those reasons weren't even the ones I tried not to think about.

*But I can't go there right now.*

I caught myself. I was working and the last thing I could afford to do was acknowledge that I was thinking about *him*.

The six exiles started to shift the remains of the bodies toward the incinerator, tossing them with supernatural strength and no care. I half expected them to try and mince the meat and load it onto trays for sale tomorrow. I wouldn't put anything past them.

"Make sure you take the index fingers," one of the suited exiles instructed. "Mr. George is expecting me to deliver them to him tonight."

*That's a shame. Though I'm sure Mr. George will receive a knock at his door nonetheless.*

"I still don't understand why we don't just kill him too," another said.

"Are you challenging me?" The exile who had spoken first stepped forward.

His questioner mirrored his actions.

*Here we go.*

"If I must."

Exiles never back down. Their pride and egotism combined with their unique brand of insanity is just too much to ignore. Angels were not created to take corporeal forms on earth. Though they have existed for eternity, in human bodies, they manifest emotions in ways their innate nature can never process. It makes them unstable. And almost unstoppable.

I wriggled into a better position and waited patiently, knowing that this would work in my favor.

Sure enough, the exile who had spoken out first also struck out first, engaging with the suited exile. It didn't last long. The suit, clearly the older of the two and a true fighter—my guess was he had once been either a Domination or a Power—overpowered his opponent, snapping his neck and making quick work of removing his heart.

We had our methods of ending their immortal existence; they had theirs.

*Happy days. I now have one less exile to take care of.*

I checked the time and sighed. If I didn't get this show on the road, I'd lose my window. And fighting alone was always my preference.

The drop to the ground was at least two stories high, but I landed behind the group of exiles lightly, thanks to my angelic enhancements.

Breathing calmly, I let go of the power I was holding tightly within, just enough to lower my shields.

The exiles, who had been preoccupied with their boasting, stiffened instantly and spun around to face the new threat. It was almost comical, the look of surprise on their faces. I guess a Grigori had never snuck up on them before.

Responding quickly, the suited exile stepped forward, shoving two of them to the side, the five of them quickly forming a semicircle around me.

*So nice of them to stand in single file.*

But the way he studied me—with trademark exile insanity and undisguised raw desire—made me think that this one recognized me. It happened from time to time.

I wanted to sit around and chew the fat. Really. I couldn't think of anything I'd rather do with my time than hear about how they intended to rip me limb from limb and how that would make them as great as gods and me the most pathetic of humans. But when you've heard it all before and always walked away—or, at the very least, been carried—while they were returned for their ultimate judgment, it gets old. So, I cut to the chase.

"You have a choice. Make it or I will make it for you," I said, knowing that of all Grigori, I alone had the right to put it like that. "Consider wisely," I reinforced. After all, I could return them like any other Grigori with one of our blades, but if I willed it, I could also strip them of their angelic strengths and leave them human—a fate exiles considered worse than an eternity in the pits of Hell. As far as I was aware, I was the only Grigori who could do this without requiring the exile in question to first choose such a fate. Which, of course, never happened.

"You brought Lilith to her end," the suit said, his head tilted to the side, as if confused.

*Yeah, that's right, little ol' me.*

*And it only cost me everything that mattered.*

I raised my eyebrows. "Time's almost up," I said, refraining from closing my eyes briefly as I felt a surge of power within, something that had been happening increasingly. I was getting stronger, and exactly what that meant and how to harness it wasn't the kind of knowledge I was excited to discover.

I could strip them all, make their choice for them, and be done with it, but I'd only done it twice. Onyx had been my first, and I'd seen the pain it caused him. I didn't like knowing I was the one who took away his choice. Who was I to do such a thing? The second had been a demonstration, and had resulted in the exile in question meeting a quick death. I can't say I regretted it—he'd been one of the exiles so happy to see me strapped to a crucifix and tortured for hours—but still...

Anyway, tonight was more like training, and I'd been taught to be thorough. So, when the suit threw the first exile at me—knowing he'd be nothing more than a momentary distraction while I took him down and he lined up the next one—I got to work.

I braced, grabbing my dagger and moving into position. By the time the exile came within range, my dagger had sliced through his heart and he was no longer there. Simply gone. Where did their physical forms go? Beats me.

I was already spinning by the time the second one was sent flying through the air toward me. My foot stopped his momentum and threw him back. I was on him in an instant, my dagger going straight to his heart. It didn't *need* to be the heart to return them, just a killing blow inflicted by a Grigori weapon. You could slice into exiles all day long with your garden--variety knife or shoot them with a gun, but neither option worked. I'd never seen a Grigori manage to rip out an exile's heart barehanded, and even though the trick worked for exiles taking out other exiles, something told me that it did not alter our rules. Permanent results for Grigori over exiles only came via the blades of angels.

*Or my blood.*

The third exile went much the same way, and soon enough I was left being circled by the two suits. To

my surprise, they actually worked together—exiles aren't good at that—boxing me into a corner. The brown-haired exile in the black suit moved in on me when the other one feigned a move to my right. I took a closed fist across the face and a foot to the stomach.

I heard a crack—broken rib—but I didn't register the pain. That kind of pain was barely a tickle compared to the agony I carried inside, every moment of every day.

My pause gave the other exile the chance to take a swing. His foot collided with my hand so hard that my dagger went flying across the room. I kept my eyes on my attackers but my ear on my weapon, listening to the reverberations as it slid along the concrete floor and eventually hit the far wall with a clang.

The exiles smiled.

I sighed.

Then I leapt into the air, gaining enough height to grip the brown-haired exile's throat between my knees. Twisting my body as I fell through the air, I dragged the exile down with me, his neck breaking with a loud crunch.

It wouldn't keep him down for good, but a broken neck buys time.

The exile in the gray suit grabbed me roughly from behind and threw me into the wall.

I groaned as I slid down the metal piping my back had hit. It was the opposite wall to my dagger.

*Damn it.*

It wasn't an ideal situation. And I wasn't fool enough to delude myself into thinking I could make it to my dagger. I was regretting my decision not to wear any other weapons tonight, but my dagger was the only weapon that, when sheathed, was invisible to human eyes.

*Think, Vi.*

I'd come down behind a wall of old crates. I was considering how I could use them to my advantage when I spotted a piece of the slim metal piping I'd broken in my fall. It lay by my foot.

I could hear the exiles moving toward me. They were cackling.

"We should take her body with us to the tournament tonight," one said.

The other one laughed. "That would definitely put dark in the lead."

"And everyone would know that *we* were the ones who killed her."

*Can anyone say "premature victory"?*

Without stopping to think, I pulled off the bracelet from my left wrist, using the specially designed clasp to cut open the flesh around my silver marking, currently swirling in the presence of exiles, and let it spill onto the end of the metal bar.

It took just a few seconds, and as soon as I palmed the pipe, the exiles started to throw the crates aside then came into view, their smiles wide with anticipation.

I stood. I didn't return their smiles. I didn't bother to do anything other than what needed to be done.

I lunged, raising my elbow into the face of the black-haired exile as I spun, the metal pipe striking his companion through the heart. He was gone. I turned back to the first exile and, hoping that there was still

enough of my blood on the pipe to do the trick and using my supernatural speed for all it was worth, I jammed the pipe straight into his neck.

His face wore an expression of pure surprise.

I'd seen that look before.

I sighed and my shoulders slumped forward, unfulfilled. This was my job, one that I would do for as long as I existed, which could be a significantly long time. But two years ago, I'd accepted that there was no longer any satisfaction to be had in my world.

No fairytales.

Only the cold.

Turning toward where I thought my dagger had landed, my surroundings suddenly changed.

I was no longer seeing the warehouse. There were flashes of white, moving fast, pounding hooves. Horses. Silver streaked through the air like a dance. Swords. Slashes of red painted the sky. Something sharp and deadly ripping through flesh—wet and gruesome. Claws. Thousands and thousands of beings as far as I could see fought ruthlessly, with no sign of tiring. In the center, two warriors battled beneath a blinding light. I could not make out their faces.

I blinked hard.

The image was gone, and in its place Gray stood against the wall of Lincoln's warehouse, casually flipping my dagger in the air. "Would you like me to applaud?" he asked.

Leaning against a metal support pole, he had that midtwenties look I'd come to associate with the older Grigori—though I had no idea how old he really was—and was dressed in his usual black jeans, black T-shirt, and black leather jacket. Black really was the only color worth investing in—blood stains everything else. He sported about a week's worth of growth on his face, though his head was shaved, the scars that ran over the top of his skull telling of a history both terrible and secret. Grigori did not generally scar, so I knew that whatever had caused these had occurred before Gray had turned seventeen.

I swallowed over the lump in my throat and glanced around as I composed myself. The whole...hallucination...had lasted only a couple of seconds. I clenched my jaw.

*Christ. It was nothing. I'm just imagining things.*

I snapped my bracelet back in place over my marking and shot him a dry look. "Should I be charging a spectator fee?"

My voice sounded normal but my ears felt like they were still ringing with the echoes of battle.

"Not if the show is going to be over so fast, princess."

I glared at him for persisting with the stupid nickname. "You know, you could've stepped in and given me a hand."

"Sure," he said with a solemn nod. "And you could've waited until the meet time we'd all agreed on too."

I looked away briefly. "So, why are *you* here early?" I asked, hoping to divert the conversation.

Gray tilted his head. "Because I know you."

I shrugged off the veiled accusation, even though it was true. To a degree.

“It was easier this way.”

He threw my dagger into the air, and I caught it by the hilt and slipped it back into its sheath.

“Well you can explain that to the others, since they just arrived.”